

CHAPTER ONE

Maybe It Was That Low-Cut Cocktail Dress

Thursday, December 29

Universe Ryder watched the starting Bolammes drill their way through a thicket of arm-waving backup players. They leapt for perfect layup after layup, all except for the last and largest, whose shot snapped off the backboard and skipped across the rim.

“Aw, goddamn your son of a bitch face, Carter! *Goddamn your son of a bitch face!*” number thirteen Billy Bolamme snarled, pointing to his ball bouncing downcourt towards the Pilsdale Planters working through their own pregame drills.

“Wha--? I didn’t do nothin’!” number nineteen protested.

“You were too slow! You got in my goddamn way, and threw my timing off, that’s what!” Alone of his teammates Billy wore camouflage shorts with a dozen hand grenades clacking around his waist. He topped John Carter by a couple inches and was rough, stubble-bearded, and meaty compared to the lean, ethereal orange-clad Bolammes forward.

“Well, sorry, dude, but--”

“Goddamn you, Carter, you screw with me again and I’ll rip that son of a bitch face right off ya!”

“Billy, Billy ...” muttered coach Hiram Bolamme beside Uni.

Universe shrugged. “He’s just, you know ... like he needs to blow steam off before a game and all. He’s just worked up.”

“Yeah, but the refs’ll hit him with a hundred technicals if he does that during the game.”

She shifted uncomfortably from paunchy, jowly Coach Hiram with his wispy mustache,

his glittering black eyes, his tie strangling his wrinkled neck, his plaid three-piece suit with its cigarette stench. Billy had told her to leave the top two buttons undone on her tight black blouse, but Billy's father's eyes were glued to her modest cleavage. Meanwhile the sweaty Billy drove downcourt for another layup.

Billy had sure been mad she wasn't a virgin. She'd asked him who was anymore. He said he was surprised a sixteen-year-old girl was having sex, but what he meant is he couldn't believe a girl as mousy as Universe could ever have had screwed anyone, much less already be on the pill and ready for action. Had she ever shocked him!

"Damn it to goddamn *hell!*" Billy screamed as he missed a long shot.

"Billy, *please*," Hiram called, pointing to a booth high above the floor of the fifteen thousand-capacity Bolamme Civic Center, its ON AIR sign glowing red. "The light's on in Dan's booth. That'll go out over the radio."

"*Git outa my way!*" Billy growled, shoving a smaller Bolammes player at the three-point line. "Git! Ya little fart!"

"*Dammit*, Billy!"

Billy whirled. "Shut up, Dad! I'm warming myself up, and these buttheads are crapping all over me!"

"Billy, practice is *over*. Dan's about to announce the start of the game, so if you'll please--"

Billy scowled. Uni looked away. He'd only screamed at her once like that, but she knew he did it every day with Hiram. She was afraid that just by sitting next to his father she might catch it herself. She felt Billy's eyes on her.

"Hey, Uni, lookin' good today! Damn good!" he said, checking out her chest and giving

her a thumbs up.

Uni nodded. They'd only been together two and a half weeks. Earlier this month he'd dropped by the art gallery to see his dad, then had offered to drive her home. Maybe it was that low-cut cocktail dress. Billy seemed to be twenty years old, tall and chunky, long greasy hair squeezed by a headband. She still wondered why she'd turned to ask her boss if it was okay if she went with his son. Why should she worry what Hiram Bolamme thought?

Or maybe it was the mescaline. She'd been pretty messed up that afternoon, and Billy had come on to her like a god. She could hardly wait to get into the car with him. And then everything happened all at once. Universe had been so freaked that she'd spent the entire night shuddering through eleven million hallucinogenic dimensions, trying to calm herself by holding her phone to her ear and listening to barely audible classical music.

But the whole thing with Billy had been foreordained. Although she'd noticed him their freshman year at Billy InterEagle, he'd merely come across then as a hulking, foul-mouthed blank. He'd dropped out that first year and she hadn't seen much of him after that. But last February 19th she'd run into him after school. It turned out they were both waiting for the Pharmacist, and she'd nervously mentioned it was her birthday. Billy had hooted that it was his birthday too, that they were exactly the same age. Somehow this revelation had been the seed of a future relationship.

"How come you're sittin' with the old fart, though?" Billy said, pointing at Hiram.

"Well, I wanted to be close to the action, I guess."

"Hell," Billy drawled, looking over the emptying court, "you wanna be in on the action, maybe we oughta suit you up. Be a damn better forward than that pussy Carter there," he said, pointing to the Bolammes power forward coming in off the floor. Carter grimaced and looked

away.

“TESTING--1-2-3-4--TESTING,” Dan Ryder warbled over the P.A. system. An old man’s voice, Uni thought. Strange she’d never noticed that about her father before. Everyone praised his deep rich voice, but for the first time Uni heard the age in it.

“Guess ol’ Dan’s gotta piss around a while before we start,” Billy said to no one in particular, plopping down with a clammy arm around Uni’s thin shoulders. He let his fingers dangle to her little breasts. She sighed. Ownership.

“GOOD EVENING, LADIES AND GENTLEMEN. I’M DAN RYDER, YOUR ANNOUNCER FOR THIS GAME BOTH IN-HOUSE AND FOR KBLM 1327 ON YOUR DIAL.”

“HEY, DON’T FORGET YOUR BACKUP MAN, ME, FRANK CHESTER!” a younger voice boomed. “THE UP AND COMING GENIUS OF THE AIRWAVES!”

“AND THAT, LADIES AND GENTLEMEN,” Dan Ryder said ruefully, “IS WHAT AWAITS YOU WHEN I GO AHEAD AND DROP DEAD.”

“OR WHEN YOUR THROAT GETS SORE, DON’T FORGET, THAT’S IN THE CONTRACT, BUDDY! YOUR THROAT GETS SORE, I TAKE OVER THE MIKE! THEN WE SEE SOME REAL ANNOUNCING!”

Uni winced along with fifteen thousand people trying to ignore the boring banter her father and Frank felt obligated to go through before each game. Frank Chester was definitely full of himself. Over for dinner one night he’d corralled her in the basement and put all these moves on her, as if he were pretending to kiss her, maybe so he could feel her chest or something, except he kept his hands on her shoulders and buried his lips in her neck. It all culminated in nothing. He was just drunk. He was cute, though, with his long smooth face and

his tidy little mustache contrasting with unkempt sandy hair, and more than once Uni had fantasized what would've happened if he'd been sober and seriously interested in her. He was only nineteen, after all, just a little older than she was.

“WELL, LADIES AND GENTLEMEN, TODAY'S A SPECIAL DAY,” Ryder went on. “BEFORE WE BEGIN TODAY'S GAME WITH THE PILSDALE PLANTERS, WE'D LIKE TO REMIND YOU THAT TODAY IS BILLY BOLAMME DAY HERE IN BILLY, NORTH CAROLINA.”

“Huh. How 'bout dat?” Billy mumbled. “I like totally goddamn forgot, man.”

“That's why I wanted you to tone it down out there,” Hiram said.

“BILLY BOLAMME IS OF COURSE PROBABLY THE GREATEST SIXTEEN-YEAR-OLD BASKETBALL PLAYER ALIVE.”

“AW, LAY IT ON THICK, WILL YA?” came Frank's retort.

“I GET *PAID* TO LAY IT ON THICK,” Ryder said. “NOW AS I WAS SAYING--”

“OF COURSE WE'RE PREJUDICED IN FAVOR OF THE HOME TEAM,” Frank chortled. “WE *ARE* THE HOME TEAM. CARD-CARRYING EMPLOYEES OF THE BILLY BOLAMMES. SO NATURALLY WE FOAM AT THE MOUTH AT THE VERY *MENTION* OF BILLY BOLAMME.”

“ANYWAY, FIRST OF ALL, I'D LIKE TO EXPLAIN THE WEIRD ECHO YOU RADIO LISTENERS ARE PROBABLY GETTING ABOUT NOW. THAT'S BECAUSE WE'RE ANNOUNCING THE GAME OVER THE BOLAMME CIVIC CENTER PUBLIC ADDRESS SYSTEM WHILE WE'RE SIMULTANEOUSLY BROADCASTING THE GAME FOR KBLM 1327 ON YOUR DIAL. THERE'S THE TIME DELAY ECHO AROUND THE ARENA, AND WHEN I'VE LISTENED TO SOME OF THESE GAMES OVER THE RADIO

I'VE HEARD THE WEIRD FEEDBACK."

"LIKE WHEN HE HAD A SORE THROAT AND WAS SICK IN BED AND THEY LET *ME* ANNOUNCE IT!"

"Aw, cripes, get to the point!" Billy yelled to the booth.

"WELL, AT ANY RATE," Ryder said. "BILLY BOLAMME. DROPPED OUT OF BILLY INTEREAGLE HIGH SCHOOL HIS FRESHMAN YEAR. 'I JUST COULDN'T STAND THE FREAKIN' BS ANYMORE,' TO QUOTE OUR BILLY."

"Damn right," Billy muttered.

"BILLY DID PLAY MOST HIS FRESHMAN YEAR ON THE VARSITY TEAM, BUT HOW COULD HE HOPE TO SHINE IN SUCH A MEDIOCRE ENVIRONMENT? HE WAS A DECENT FORWARD, SURE, BUT EVEN BILLY ADMITS IT TOOK WHAT HE CALLS A *VISIONARY EXPERIENCE* TO MAKE HIM THE OUTSTANDING CENTER FOR THE BOLAMMES THAT HE IS TODAY."

"VISIONARY EXPERIENCE, HELL," Frank cut in. "HE WAS TRIPPING HIS BRAINS OUT ON LSD THE NIGHT HE SCORED EIGHTY POINTS IN A ROW."

"WELL, THANK GOD HE DROPPED OUT RIGHT AFTER THAT GAME IS ALL WE CAN SAY. IT WAS AS IF FATE *KNEW* HIS REAL CAREER COULD ONLY UNFOLD IN THE NEW JUNIOR DROPOUT BASKETBALL LEAGUE, WHICH HAS ITS NATIONAL HEADQUARTERS RIGHT HERE IN BILLY, NORTH CAROLINA."

"What're these craphead jerks sayin' about me now?" Billy grunted. "We got a goddamn game to play, dudes."

"WELL, SOMEHOW IT MADE HIM A LEGEND IN OUR TIME," Ryder continued. "WHAT A CHARACTER OUR BILLY IS!"

“YEAH, THOSE PLASTIC HAND GRENADES SURE AIN’T REGULATION!”

“WELL, REGULATIONS JUST AREN’T FOR OUR BILLY, I GUESS. ANYWAY, LADIES AND GENTLEMEN, WE CERTAINLY KNOW HOW IMPORTANT OUR DROPOUTS ARE. THEY MUST BE NURTURED WITH ALL THEIR FOIBLES, DON’T YOU AGREE?”

“HELL, YEAH! I WAS A DROPOUT MYSELF, A TOTAL SUCCESS STORY IF I DO SAY SO! PLAYED A GREAT SEASON FOR THE BOLAMMES. I WAS EVEN NAMED MR. JUNIOR DROPOUT BASKETBALL.”

“OH, HOW WE ALL REMEMBER,” Ryder said. “LIKE THE TIME YOU BLEW YOUR BEETS ALL OVER THAT REFEREE IN THE FOURTH GAME OF THE DROPOUT CUP.”

“SCREW IT! THAT WAS THE THIRD GAME, DUDE. IT WAS THE *FOURTH* GAME WHERE THAT JERK STOMPED ON MY KNEE AND BLEW MY CAREER! MAN, I COULDA GONE PROFESSIONAL, EVERYONE KNEW THAT. BUT HERE I AM SCRAPING BY, TRYIN’ TO GET ANNOUNCER GIGS.”

“*Get to the goddamn point, fartface!*” Billy screamed, shooting the bird at the radio booth. “We got a goddamn game ta play!”

“WE SEEM TO BE HEARING SOMETHING FROM BILLY HIMSELF. CAN’T MAKE IT OUT VERY WELL, RADIO LISTENERS, I’M AFRAID,” Ryder said.

“HE’S SAYING, *GET TO THE GODDAMN POINT, FARTFACE,*” Frank noted. “HE THINKS WE’RE BEING TOO LONG-WINDED UP HERE.”

“OKAY, OKAY, LET ME JUST READ THE REST OF THIS THING HERE AND WE’LL GET IT ON. WE NOTE THAT WHEN HIRAM AND MADELINE BOLAMME

MADE THEIR FORTUNE HERE AT BILLY, THEY WERE SO GRATEFUL THAT THEY WANTED TO GIVE BACK TO THE COMMUNITY. SO THEY NAMED THEIR ONLY CHILD AFTER THE TOWN. THEN, WHEN THEY FUNDED THE JUNIOR DROPOUT BASKETBALL LEAGUE, THE FIRST TEAM WAS NAMED AFTER *THEM*. AND NOW THEIR SON PLAYS FOR THIS TEAM AND IS ITS GREATEST EXEMPLAR.”

“AND SO ALL THIS HOT AIR IS TO EXPLAIN HOW WE GOT BILLY BOLAMME PLAYING FOR THE BILLY BOLAMMES?” Frank said.

“EXACTLY.”

“CRIPES, NOBODY EVER OFFERED TO NAME A TEAM AFTER *ME*. EVEN THOUGH I WAS DAMN GOOD. I COULD SUIT UP EVEN NOW!”

“FRANK, WE HEAR THIS BEFORE EVERY SINGLE GAME.”

The chatter from Uni’s father and Frank boomed crazily. It was odd enough when someone spoke only a few words at a time, but the endless drivel vibrated mindlessly through the arena. “How do people *stand* this?” she cried, putting her hands over her ears.

Billy shot to his feet. “Hey, pipe down up there, buttheads! You’re hurtin’ my girlfriend’s ears!”

“Billy! That’s my father up there!”

“All the more reason for the idiot to shut his damn yap,” Billy drawled, then screamed to the booth: “*Ya heard me! Shut the hell up, ya stupid schmucks! We gotta play a goddamn game!*”